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By: Rep. Joe Courtney

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As Congress gears up for the 2012 Farm Bill reauthorization, America's dairy farmers need particular attention to safeguard their livelihood. Coming off recent catastrophic lows, we must reform our nation's dairy programs so that prices are fair to farmers and reasonable to consumers.

In 2008, dairy farmers made record profits with strong prices for many products. A few short months later in 2009, dairy prices collapsed. At the lowest points of that crisis, dairy farmers in Connecticut and across the country actually lost money on every gallon of milk they produced. With the dairy crisis looming on farms and in rural communities across the country, I joined with my colleagues from across the country and across the aisle, to reconstitute the then-defunct Congressional Dairy Farmers Caucus.

The Caucus quickly worked to address the challenges faced by dairy farmers. Bolstered in our efforts by the leadership of then-Agriculture Committee Chairman Collin Peterson (D-Minn.), the Caucus pushed the U.S. Department of Agriculture to take administrative action to provide immediate relief to farmers. We also helped secure a one-time emergency payment to dairy farmers to ease the financial burden they were facing.

In the months and years since, dairy prices have rebounded. Many farms have returned to profitability and paid off some of the debt they incurred. Sadly, however, other farms did not survive the crisis and were forced to literally shutter their barn doors for good. In vivid color, the '09 crisis showed that our existing patchwork of programs aimed at assisting dairy farmers was inadequate and in need of a total overhaul.

With that in mind, I am once again partnering with my colleague Collin Peterson and others to preserve this vital industry and American consumers. Together we introduced the Dairy Security Act, legislation based largely on the Foundation for the Future plan created by the National Milk Producers Federation. This bill would ensure that federal dairy programs provide relief to

farmers, so that in good times and bad they can make a profit on the products they deliver. The Dairy Security Act consists of a margin protection program and a stabilization program. In tandem, these programs provide a better safety net for the industry and would prevent long periods of depressed prices.

Our bill would replace programs that have proven ineffective at keeping farms in business during market downturns. While I support programs like Milk Income Loss Contract for the financial relief it provides to farmers in bad times, since its creation in the 2002 Farm Bill more than a third of America's dairy farmers have gone out of business. Clearly, the program is insufficient, and new steps are needed to defend our farmers.

While we are far removed from the worst months of 2009, the ever-increasing cost of feed staples like corn, alfalfa and soybeans points to another downturn in milk prices. If Congress fails to act and pass this Dairy Security Act in the Farm Bill this year, I fear that thousands more farms -- and a very American way of life -- will be lost for good.

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